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**China's Interesting Times**

**This year sees a remarkable coincidence of anniversaries that tell the history of modern China. Some will be celebrated by the authorities on a grand scale, others will be wilfully ignored, but all reveal important aspects of the country’s past, as Jonathan Fenby explains.**

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| Statue of Mao erected in 1969 with Shenyang's Huaxia Bank, 2002 (Getty / AFP / Frederic Brown) | | |
|  | **Statue of Mao erected in 1969 with Shenyang's Huaxia Bank, 2002 (Getty / AFP / Frederic Brown)** |  |

If there is one major country where history is a political instrument, it is China. The treatment of the past has been a function of power since the centuries of imperial rule when new dynasties would set officials to write accounts of their predecessors to prove how the old rulers had forfeited the Mandate of Heaven and how the newcomers were entitled to ascend the Dragon Throne. That has remained the case under Communist rule. Recently, an academic got into trouble for suggesting a reexamination of the Boxer Rising of 1900, which is officially classified as a proletarian movement whereas it was actually the work of unemployed rural youths animated by hatred of foreigners rather than driven by Marxist ideology.  
  
So an unusual coincidence of a series of historic anniversaries this year presents a particularly interesting moment both to look back over how China has evolved in modern times and to consider how the Communist Party is going to deal with some decidedly awkward events from the past. The anniversaries range across a century and a half and constitute more than a conflation of dates that happen to end in the numeral nine. They contain major themes of China’s modern history, running from the intrusion of British warships into the Pearl River delta 170 years ago to the emergence of the People’s Republic as a major global presence in the generation since Deng Xiaoping’s market-led economic reform got going at the end of the 1970s and the crushing of dissent in Beijing in 1989.   
  
The 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic on October 1st will be an occasion for celebrations orchestrated by the film director Zhang Yimou who choreographed the opening and closing ceremonies of last year’s Beijing Olympics. But it will also provide an occasion for unofficial questioning of what the Communist Party stands for now that the revolutionary teachings of Mao Zedong have been placed on the back shelf and the movement he led has adopted economic improvement rather than ideology as its claim to rule the world’s most heavily populated nation. The occasion will also be a reminder that, since 1949, Taiwan has been separate from mainland China and shows no sign of heeding Beijing’s calls for reunification as it pursues its democratisation.  
  
Another of this year’s historical dates, the start of the great famine, which began in 1959 and is estimated to have taken up to 30 million lives, provides a terrible example of where unchecked autocracy which cares little for its people can lead. This is also the 50th anniversary of the rising in Tibet against Chinese rule which led to the Dalai Lama fleeing to India and whose consequences remain with us today.  
  
The emergence of China on the world stage since Deng launched his economic reforms has been so dramatic that it is easy to neglect what went before. But the events whose 20th, 50th, 60th and 90th anniversaries fall this year form part of the tapestry of the past which is an essential element in shaping today’s China. If history is to be carefully controlled by the regime, the past is not another country but is present amid the gleaming tower blocks and vast infrastructure projects that mark the mainland today. As History Today’s motto puts it, ‘What happened then matters now.’

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| China's fighting warlords, 1918 cartoon (History Today archive) | | |
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Even if his teachings are largely ignored, a huge portrait of Mao still looks out over Tiananmen Square and his face is on virtually all bank notes. Since 1949  the Communist Party leadership has lived and worked in a compound alongside the imperial Forbidden City in the centre of the capital. Confucianism is undergoing a revival and Daoist temples are crowded on the anniversary of the birth of its founder, Laozi, in the fifth century BC. The carefully regimented proceedings at major occasions such as the annual meeting of the legislature each March resemble imperial rituals with provincial delegates flocking to the capital to rub shoulders for a few days with the mandarins who preside over the nation’s destinies. But the past which will be marked by this year’s anniversaries is not always as straightforward or politically facile as the authorities might wish and that makes them sensitive occasions as the regime continues to find it difficult to confront some awkward historical truths.  
  
A line runs from the first of the anniversaries, the start of the Opium War in 1839, to the take-off of market-led economic growth 140 years later – that of China’s relations with the outside world, which have been marked by periods of indifference followed by eras of engagement. The imperial dynasties were not as cut off from the rest of the globe as is often thought. Contacts with countries to the west of China and in south-east Asia were common in the 2,200-year imperial era, with occasional bursts of maritime activity.   
  
Still, the dynastic rulers of China regarded themselves as occupying a special place, the Middle Kingdom, and their emperors as enjoying quasi-divine status. As the Qianlong emperor told George III’s emissaries at the end of the 18th century, they had no need for others. Their country fed itself and accounted for an estimated one third of global wealth.

***"In the late imperial period officials tried to introduce western technology to the Middle Kingdom"***

Then British warships sailed into the Pearl River to enforce free trade in the form of opium imports from India and impose on China the ‘unequal treaties’ that gave the Europeans port concessions and immunity from Chinese law. Though the imperial commissioner who had been deputed to send the foreigners packing was disgraced and exiled to the far west of China, the Daoguang emperor of the time was not unduly concerned by the crushing defeat inflicted on the imperial junk fleet. The foreigners were ‘not worth attending to’, he told a court official, while a mandarin put the British ‘in the class of dogs and horses’. The Qing dynasty’s main concern was the great land mass stretching from their home region of Manchuria through Mongolia to Xinjiang and Tibet. They did not appreciate the importance of maritime power and, rightly, reckoned that the British and the other Europeans who followed them were no dynastic threat,  though the Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu wrote to the court in London to ask how Britain would react if it became the target for an opium exporter:

**Suppose there were people from another country who carried opium for sale to England and seduced your people into buying and smoking it? May you, O King, sift your wicked people before they come to China, in order to guarantee the peace of your nation, to show further the sincerity of your politeness  and . . . let the two countries enjoy together the blessings of peace. How fortunate, how fortunate indeed! After receiving this dispatch will you immediately give us a prompt reply regarding the details and circumstances of your cutting off the opium traffic.**

**Key dates in the history of modern China**

**1839** Outbreak of Opium War between Britain and China in the Pearl River and seizure of Hong Kong. The war leads to Treaty of Nanjing which grants foreigners treaty ports in China and immunity from Chinese law. Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia and Italy all gain concessions under the ‘unequal treaties’ that were finally given up in the Second World War.  
  
**1919** The May 4th movement of students and intellectuals in favour of modernisation, democracy and iconoclasm begins with a protest in Beijing at the treatment of China under the Versailles Treaty but becomes a vibrant movement of free thinking and experimentation joined by Mao Zedong.  
  
**1949** Communists defeat the Nationalists to take power as Mao proclaims that China has ‘stood up again’. Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek flees to Taiwan as head of Republic of China.  
  
**1959** After the failure of Mao’s Great Leap Forward, a famine begins which kills an estimated 30 million people.  A rising in Tibet, which China invaded in 1950, leads to a tightening of Chinese control and the flight of the Dalai Lama to India.

**1969** Ninth Communist Party Congress celebrates the Cultural Revolution and names army chief Lin Biao as Mao’s successor, but he dies in a plane crash in 1971 fleeing China for the USSR.  
  
**1979** Market-led economic reform decreed by Deng Xiaoping, radically alters not only China but the entire global economy.   
  
**1989** Communist Party leaders send tanks into Beijing’s Tiananmen Square to quash student protest, killing many more ordinary citizens who try to stop the suppression.

The incursions into China were undoubtedly acts of aggressive 19th-century imperialism with no moral justification (despite the arguments put forward by missionaries imbued with the spirit of muscular Christianity and dreaming of converting millions of Chinese to their faith). But the foreigners also brought modern methods with them and their treaty ports became the most advanced places in China. In the late imperial period officials tried to introduce western technology to the Middle Kingdom, laying railways and opening factories. Even ardent nationalists like Sun Yat-sen, who became the first republican president after the fall of the empire in 1912, chose to live in the French Concession in Shanghai. The Nationalist government which took power in the late 1920s enlisted western experts and drew on Washington for Lend-Lease aid during the Second World War. After China’s entry into the Korean War in 1950, the People’s Republic retreated in on itself except in seeking Soviet aid for its early Five Year Plans and launching revolutionary forays in what was then known as the Third World. Then, in 1972, Richard Nixon made his shock visit to Beijing to meet Mao and eight years later Deng went to Washington after the US and the People’s Republic had established diplomatic relations.    
  
Following the death of the Great Helmsman in 1976, Deng Xiaoping grasped the fact that the nation needed the outside world if it was to achieve the material progress he considered essential. The failure of Mao’s industrialisation effort, the Great Leap Forward, in the late 1950s and the experience of the famine that followed was evidence that China could not go on along the old collectivist, stand-alone path. The trauma of ten years of the Cultural Revolution was a further spur to change. The 1969 Communist Party Congress, another of this year’s anniversary events, declared the success of the movement Mao had launched three years earlier and named the highly neurotic army chief, Lin Biao, as his successor. But the truth was that China was descending into anarchy. The economy was in deep trouble and the ruling party was ravaged by attacks from Red Guards following Mao’s calls for more and more revolution.   
  
The importance of nurturing relations with richer nations was founded on a simple economic reality. The plan was to make China richer by expanding its manufacturing and industry. But domestic demand was too weak to support the volume of production required to have an effect on such a large nation. So exports had to fill the gap. China needed the world while the world would soon need China to provide low-cost goods, keep down inflation and, for the United States, to suck in Chinese savings and foreign exchange earnings to purchase US government securities, fund the federal deficit and provide the cheap money which helped to fuel the debt-led boom that has now collapsed.  
  
Since the launch of economic reform just 30 years ago, the foreign presence in China has grown enormously in the form of direct investment in factories, tourism and the presence of Western fast-food outlets (and Chinese imitators) in major cities. China’s exports have been accompanied by 30 million people from the mainland travelling abroad each year. At the same time, suspicions that can be traced back to 1839 remain on both sides. How those will be worked out, particularly in the context of a global economic crisis, is another of the legacies of the past marked by this year’s anniversaries.  
  
The search for modernity and freedom in a way that can be accommodated within China’s view of itself as a special nation has been another theme shown up in two more of this year’s anniversaries, the May 4th movement of 1919 and the Beijing massacres of June 4th, 1989. At the end of the 19th century the Guangxu emperor had a stab at reform in the Hundred Days of 1898 when he issued an avalanche of reforming edicts which overwhelmed the bureaucracy and alienated the gentry and

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| Tianamen Square in a 1950 poster (History Today archive) | | |
|  | **Tianamen Square in a 1950 poster (History Today archive)** |  |

Manchu nobles who formed the basis of the imperial regime. The response of his aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi, which led to the emperor being locked up in the Summer Palace till his death in 1908, marked a victory for conservative regime-preservation which has been a constant of Chinese history. That, in turn, has brought violent reaction from those seeking to change the regime who see the use of force as the only way to triumph. Twice in the 20th century, military force brought regime change, first with the victory of the Nationalists over the warlords in the late 1920s and then with the Communist victory over the Nationalists 60 years ago this October, a victory in which the prowess of the People’s Liberation Army, combined with the extreme disarray of society after eight years of occupation by Japan, won the day.  
  
May 4th, 1919, was set off by a protest in Beijing at the way the Allies had handed Germany’s former concessions in China to Japan in the First World War settlement. It spawned a stream of intellectually questioning works in politics, literature and the arts which recognised the importance of the individual. Early Communists were affected by it. Mao himself wrote:

**Since the May 4th Movement, things have been different. A brand new cultural force came into being in China, that is, the communist culture and ideology guided by the Chinese Communists.**

Some of China’s major writers of the last century were part of the movement. It is still referred to by liberals and reformers as a moment when at least some Chinese saw the need for modernisation, democracy, science and individual rights in place of Confucian traditionalism and the outdated social structure which had not been shaken by the fall of the empire seven years earlier.    
  
But for all the intellectual heritage it left, the practical effects of the movement were limited. The great warlords who split China between them in the 1920s were not influenced by such thinking and then Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists clamped down on intellectual and political freedom after establishing their government in Nanjing in the late 1920s. In 1989 the student protestors in Beijing and many other cities followed the May 4th heritage in questioning the society and structures which had been put in place in four decades of Communist rule. Their demands were manifold and sometimes incoherent. Some were spurred by the economic conditions of the time as high inflation made life difficult for those on fixed grants and salaries. Overall, they wanted China to set off along a new path in which the suffocating rule of the Communist Party would be relaxed and people could live and associate freely. Some in the leadership hierarchy recognised the need to talk to them. Zhao Ziyang, the reformist Communist Party leader, told the student protestors:

**Your enthusiasm for democracy and the rule of law, for the struggle against corruption and for furthering reform is very valuable ... The aims of the Party and your aims are the same ...  So please do not continue fasting. You’re young and you’ve got a long time ahead of you.**

But the conservatives in power saw a threat to their supremacy and sent in the tanks, targeting not only the students but also far more of the ordinary people of the capital who had rallied to the support of the protestors. The decision to use force taken by Deng Xiaoping and the Communist Party elders gathered in his home in Beijing, was followed three years later by the re-launching of market economic policies in the patriarch’s South Tour of 1992. These two events set the template for what has followed. On the one hand the maintenance of political autocracy and one-party rule; on the other, bounding economic growth, at least until the downturn as demand for exports in western markets slumped in 2008. Whether the present leadership can maintain the post-1989 equation and whether the Chinese people will be content with material advancement without political rights will be one of the big questions for the country and the world in the decades ahead.  
  
There is continuity, too, in China’s determination to maintain its grip on Tibet half a century after the flight of the Dalai Lama to India. This is despite the hostility of Buddhist monks and members of the local population who feel that the benefits of all the money China is pouring in to the territory are going mainly to Han Chinese immigrants. The Dalai Lama’s global status ensures that the case of Tibet is not forgotten and remains an international issue. Most recently, the decision of President Nicolas Sarkozy of France to meet the Dalai Lama sent Chinese relations with Paris into a sharp downward spin. The question is what happens when the Dalai Lama, who is now 73, dies. China claims the right to supervise the process of finding a successor and the Communist Party leader, Hu Jintao, has a personal interest in the situation having overseen another repression of unrest in Tibet in 1989, a job which drew him to the attention of Deng Xiaoping and helped his eventual ascension to the leadership in 2002. 

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| 60,000 refugees fled to Hong Kong in May 1962 to escape famine (Getty / AFP) | | |
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The more radical Tibetan monks are likely to revolt against any succession seen as being imposed by Beijing while Hu and his colleagues are adamant that Tibet is part of China and must not be allowed to secede. After the riots in March, 2008, the territory remains cordoned off, with sporadic outbreaks of unrest in Tibetan-inhabited areas in neighbouring Chinese provinces.    
  
While Beijing retains its hold on Tibet and Xinjiang, another of the events which has its 60th anniversary this year, the Nationalist flight from the mainland to Taiwan remains a further piece of unfinished history. Under Chiang Kai-shek, the island became a Cold War bastion ruled by a Kuomintang Party dictatorship. But Chiang’s son, Ching-kuo, relaxed the political constraints and the island evolved into a democracy. In 2000, Chen Shui-ban of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidency, gaining re-election four years later. The Kuomintang’s recapture of power in elections in 2008 did not signal any decline in the electorate’s attachment to the defence of ‘Taiwanese identity’ distinct from that of the mainland.   
  
Taiwan is in an uneasy geo-political position since Beijing insists that it is still a province of China and few countries want to risk incurring the People’s Republic’s displeasure on the issue even if the island is an example of the progress of democracy in Asia. History means that Beijing will not relinquish its claim to reunification, but the departure of Chiang from the mainland in 1949 and the subsequent unfolding of events across the Taiwan Strait makes a resolution seem as far away as [[](http://www.historytoday.com/dm_linkinternal.aspx?amid=3024396)](http://www.historytoday.com/dm_linkinternal.aspx?amid=3024396)ever, with both sides appearing ready to accept the status quo and economic ties taking precedence over politics.  
  
Thus, the series of anniversaries rolling out this year in China are a good example of how history is not merely a matter of the past. Some will not be recalled, at least officially, among them the Great Famine in which officials showed the hollowness of the concern for the people proclaimed by the regime. The Cultural Revolution is admitted to have been a mistake but Mao is still judged to have been 70 per cent good, 30 per cent bad. June 4th, 1989, is remembered in coded messages using the date or, officially, as a moment when the People’s Liberation Army saved China from the subversion of ‘black hand’ agents working for foreign interests. Tibet will remain sensitive for so long as its clergy and much of the native population refuse to accept Chinese rule. Taiwan will remain autonomous. The legacy of May 4th will remain with intellectuals and dissidents who dream of a democratic China in which the rule of law pertains and the Communist party no longer claims a monopoly of the Mandate of Heaven. On both sides of the debates about where China is heading, and where it should be heading, history has its part to play and anniversaries are part and parcel of that.

**Further Reading**

* Travis Haines, *Opium Wars* (Sourcebooks, 2007)
* Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004)
* Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters* (Stanford University Press, 2003)
* Sun Shuyin, *A Year In Tibet* (HarperPerrenial, 2009)
* Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts* (John Murray, 1997)
* Andrew Nathan, Perry Link & Liang Zhang, *The Tiananmen Papers* (Abacus, 2002)

**Jonathan Fenby’s** *Penguin History of Modern China* is newly published in paperback. He is the author of *Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the China He Lost* (Free Press, 2005) and China Director at the research service **Trusted Sources** www.trustedsources.co.uk.